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Aurora renovating 'shrine' to veterans

By Marie Wilson

At its peak, the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall in downtown Aurora was a shrine to fallen soldiers, an almost sacred space built on an island with an octagonal "Angel Room" and a sentry statue depicting a soldier standing guard.

A decades-long renovation process that's nearing completion aims to bring the castle-like Gothic revival building back to its former glory — or at least back to its original use as a veterans meeting hall.

"If we could get it open to the point where we could have a veterans meeting there, that would be really good," said Rena Church, director of the Aurora Public Art Commission.

But budget constraints are slowing the remaining work into three phases that could take up to four years to complete.

"The more quickly we can do this, the cheaper it is," Church said. "If we keep having to do it in phases, the cost keeps going up."

Although design for the first phase began this spring, the building won't immediately become usable again, Church said.

Michael Lambert, principal architect at Arris Architects, which has worked on GAR renovations since 1996, said 2015 — the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War — is a reasonable date to expect all work to be done.

Aurora City Council in March approved an \$838,647 contract with Arris Architects for planning interior and exterior work and running a bid process to find contractors. Inside the two-story structure, electrical, flooring and staircase work is planned, while exterior renovations, including weather sealing of a cap on top of the building, also are expected to take place soon.

For a small space barely usable as a meeting place by today's standards, some say the Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall, 23 E. Downer Place, has been through a lot.

"The building has been a work of many generations. It's been changed over the years," said Michael Sawdey, an Aurora University professor of fine arts, and a member of a commission established to oversee renovations.

After beginning its life in 1878, it's been through many renovations — most of them cosmetic, but a few structural to prevent the building from sliding into the Fox River.

"Whoever designed it originally back in the 1870s actually did a good job of building a stable structure on unstable land," Sawdey said. "In the early 1900s, when they did a lot of amateur renovations, they actually damaged some of the things that were making it stable."

Still, the building has endured the near demise of the Civil War veterans organization responsible for constructing it, the relocation of its historical artifacts and the worsening condition of the sentry statue.

The statue alone will require \$80,000 to be recast in bronze instead of pot metal and placed atop the building. The Aurora Public Art Commission seeks a total of \$600,000 to finish all planned renovations, which include interior beautification, restoration of a stained-glass window, new bathrooms and transformation of part of the space into a Civil War museum.

The building — listed on the National Register of Historic Places and Aurora's first free library — was bought by the city of Aurora in 1964 and has stood dormant since about the turn of the millennium.

Before the last three phases of renovation work could begin, someone had to decide how far back in time the renovations should bring the building.

The commission chose its original completion year of 1878 because later renovations stripped the building of some of its grandiose stained glass windows and structural integrity, Sawdey said.

In 1878, "the room had a sense of being almost a shrine on the part of their fallen comrades," he said.

Sawdey, Church and others fundraising for the GAR's renovation are envisioning the day when the space once again seems like a shrine.

To donate to the renovation fund, mail a check or money order to the Aurora Public Art Commission fund at the Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley, 111 W. Downer Place, Aurora, 60506.

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Rena Church, director and curator of the Aurora Public Art Commission, takes a look around the 1878 Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall in downtown Aurora, where renovations are ongoing.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer



Renovations at the GAR Memorial Hall in downtown Aurora include work weather-sealing a cap on top of the building's roof.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer



The staircase and one stained glass window are interior renovations soon to take place on the 1878 Grand Army of the Republic Memorial Hall in downtown, using grant money from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources.

Bev Horne | Staff Photographer



The GAR Memorial Hall in downtown Aurora is built on an island in the Fox River. Previous renovations stabilized the Gothic revival structure to keep it from sliding further east toward the water.

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